

## **Bert Sugar**

Bert Randolph Sugar is this generation's most acclaimed boxing journalist. He served as editor of three prominent magazines: *Ring Magazine*, *Boxing Illustrated*, and *Fight Game*. Currently, he offers his acerbic commentary on HBO's website and for various television networks. As old school as 15-round championship bouts and three-martini lunches, Sugar still composes on his trusty Smith-Corona electric typewriter.

Behind the ever-present fedora, cigar, and — ahem — iced beverage lurks a keen mind and a sharp wit. Sugar is a former advertising executive — he wrote the words for the famous “N-E-S-T-L-E-S: Nestles makes the very best. . .” ad campaign — who changed career course to become a sportswriter. He has written more than 50 books, many of them about boxing, but with such diverse titles as “*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro Wrestling*,” “*I Hate the Dallas Cowboys: And Who Elected Them America's Team Anyway?*” (editor), “*Hit the Sign and Win a Free Suit of Clothes from Harry Finklestein*,” and “*The Thrill of Victory: The Inside Story of ABC Sports*.” His most recent work is a compilation of his boxing writing good-naturedly entitled “*Bert Sugar on Boxing: The Best of the Sport's Most Notable Writer*” (Lyons Press). The book includes profiles, historical pieces, and Sugar's “rants and raves.”

The 67-year-old Sugar refuses to slow down. Among other projects, he has recently completed a screenplay, co-written with Academy Award-winning screenwriter Budd Schulberg (“*On the Waterfront*”), about the Joe Louis-Max Schmeling heavyweight championship fight. Spike Lee is slated to direct. He is also writing a children's book and contributes a regular column for *Smoke Magazine*.

Born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Richmond, Va., Sugar now lives in Chappaqua, N.Y., or “right around the corner from the Clintons,” as he

says, with his wife and “assorted animals.”

— David Davis

**SportsLetter:** How did you get started as a writer?

**Bert Sugar:** I just wanted to be a writer. I would’ve written on bathroom walls with lipstick. . . I was in advertising, and on the night of the blackout in New York City, in 1965, three of us advertising men went down to the bar and by candle-light began to write a book called “Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?” It was later made into a film with Doris Day.

**SL:** What drew you to boxing?

**BS:** Several things. I boxed as a kid — I was in CYO and in the Golden Gloves in Washington, D.C. I was only white kid training in Billy Edwards’ gym. I was known as “the great white hopeless.” Second, growing up in D.C., what were my choices? There were the Washington Senators, whose double-play combination was short to second to the right field stands. And the Redskins at that time were really bad. I followed all sports, but I loved boxing. When I came to New York, I decided I wanted to be a sportswriter. Unfortunately, most of the jobs were taken. So I did what Roy Campanella did. When he tried out for the baseball team and the coach said, “Take your positions,” he saw no one behind home plate. So he became a catcher. At the time, I was going to Toots Shor’s every day, where all the sportswriters gathered, and saw that the up-and-coming writers were covering baseball and football. And basketball was the hot new sport. I looked around and saw that the writers covering boxing were all older men. There was no new blood coming, so I stepped into the void.

**SL:** What was it like to hang out in Toots Shor’s?

**BS:** That was fun. The writers sat at the bar all day and all evening — Paul Gallico, Bob Consadine, all the great ones - telling stories and talking to Toots. A young upstart named Howard Cosell used to hang around, before he was anybody, talking nonsense. Joe DiMaggio would sit in his booth, smoking his cigarettes. There was a real pecking order. Walter

Smith - better known as “Red” — was my hero. He was the sweetest of men — he and Jim Murray both. I tried to sit close to Red and listen to him and soak it all in. One day, I saw him reading his column. I asked him what he was doing. He said, “I just want to see how the editors screwed it up.” It was a gathering spot, a real saloon, and there was camaraderie among the writers. I don’t think the sportswriters today have that. They stay up in their rooms and compute their frequent flier miles. They don’t tell stories anymore; they surf the web. I learned to wear a hat at Toots Shor’s. All the old-time newspapermen - like Harold Rosenthal, who broke in Roger Kahn at the Herald-Tribune — wore hats indoors. I asked them, Why do you wear a hat? They told me that, in the old days, when newspapers used linotype presses, the linotype would throw off metal filings and this would come down on their heads. So they wore hats indoors to keep off the filament. I said, if I want to be a writer, I’ll wear a hat.

**SL:** In the past few months, several fights have ended with controversial decisions, including Oscar De La Hoya-Shane Mosley II and Roy Jones, Jr.-Antonio Tarver. Is there a problem with the judges or is it the way fans watching on television view the fight?

**BS:** For the record, I had Mosley winning and I had Tarver winning. To answer your question: I think it’s more the latter, but it’s probably both. Look, a biased judge is a biased judge is a biased judge, whether through innocence or venality. This isn’t new. Everybody agrees that Jimmy Young beat Muhammad Ali. Now, when the public roots for someone, that fighter is going to win in their mind’s eye, no matter what. It’s all subjective. And if you don’t turn down the sound when you’re watching the fight, you’re going to be unduly influenced by what the announcers say.

**SL:** Should they change the system to one where the judges’ scores are posted after each round?

**BS:** Not at all. That takes away the most exciting element of boxing - and one of the most exciting in all of sports — that moment when ring announcer Michael Buffer or Jimmy Lennon Jr. comes to the mic and intones with the solemnity of Moses the decision. That’s true drama, and I wouldn’t want to see that aspect of boxing disappear. Also, they tried that in 1977, when Ali fought Ernie Shavers. NBC showed the judges’ scores

after each round. Angelo Dundee [Ed Note: Ali's longtime trainer] was smart enough to have somebody watch the fight in the locker-room and see the scorecards. He knew that Ali couldn't lose, so Ali went into a shell for the last rounds of the fight. He just didn't fight 'cause he didn't have to. So all that did was deprive fans of action.

**SL:** At this point, the most exciting American fighter out there is James Toney. Why has the U.S. had so much trouble developing young fighters recently?

**BS:** You're talking primarily in the heavyweight division. The heavyweight has gone north — as in, north of 250 pounds. A kid who's 250 pounds and reasonably coordinated is better off being a football player. He gets a college scholarship, a signing bonus when he turns pro, a pension plan, all kinds of safety nets. A fighter gets his brains bashed in. Anyone with a quarter of a brain who thinks this out will choose football. Boxing has always been the sport of the dispossessed — whether it's the Irish, the Jews, the Italians, or African-Americans. If kids get other chances to make a living and not get hit in head, they'll opt for the other chance. That's why we no longer have the Maxie Rosenblooms coming out of the tenements anymore. Second, boxing is not that glamorous anymore. You can't find it on network television. If you're not hooked up for cable television or can't afford pay-per-view, then you never get to watch boxing. So boxing has lost contact with a generation of potential fighters. The only exception to this — the only demographic where boxing hasn't lost its edge on glamour — is among Latinos.

**SL:** Why isn't the Olympics still perceived as the stepping-off spot for young American fighters?

**BS:** That used to be our farm system, from Floyd Patterson to Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay), to Joe Frazier to George Foreman. In '76, all the fights were in prime-time, so the American audience was introduced to Howard Davis, the Spinks brothers, Sugar Ray Leonard. After '76, there was less and less exposure to the point where, in 1996, the only fight they showed was at 2 in the morning. And that wasn't even on the schedule: the only reason they showed it was because David Reid, an American, knocked out a Cuban with one punch. Now boxing [in the

Olympic Games] is downplayed to the point where it's a minus 10 on the Richter scale.

**SL:** Is the dominance of Latino fighters — and Latino fans — a trend that will continue?

**BS:** For a while - yes. It's big for them. They build rings in their backyards for their boys, like Oscar De La Hoya's father did. This started with Roberto Duran — he opened the floodgates — and then Julio Cesar Chavez furthered it.

**SL:** Are you in favor of a national commission to “govern” boxing?

**BS:** Yes, but understand its shortcomings. Boxing is the most international of sports, and each country has its own system. A national commission would only govern U.S. boxing, so there would still be potential conflicts world-wide. And that's not even considering the Indian reservations, which now host many boxing cards and are their own sovereign nations. On the positive side, it would probably get rid of the governing bodies — what I call the “alphabet soups.”

**SL:** What else would you do to clean up and/or reform boxing?

**BS:** The safety of fighters is important. I think there should be some sort of national information bank so that fighters can't fight in one state one week and then fight under a different name in a different state the next week. I'd also like to see them do something on the pension side. Somebody — the promoters, the television networks — has to give something back to the fighters, to offer insurance and pension plans. If the fighter fights so many rounds, he gets “X” amount of money into his pension plan. And I think there should be uniform rules for fights — whether it's the three-knockdown rule or whatever — in every state.

**SL:** In the book, you write that you don't like to watch women box. What's wrong with women in boxing?

**BS:** Let me say from the start: women have every right to fight, just like men have every right to strip at Chippendale's. I'm not against women's

sports — I enjoy women's tennis better than men's tennis. At least they have volleys that last more than three seconds. I was raised in a southern climate. I've always believed that men are stronger and women are smarter. I just don't want to see women with their noses coming out of their ears. And I also don't think most women can fight - I think they're there for the novelty.

**SL:** What fights would you most like to see today?

**BS:** A third Barrera-Morales. De La Hoya-Floyd Mayweather, if Mayweather can move up in weight. Mayorga-Mosley. The heavyweight division is on the cusp of being called off due to lack of interest. The most serious boxing fan wouldn't recognize Corey Sanders if he walked down the street in his robe, with boxing gloves on.

**SL:** How will history judge Lennox Lewis?

**BS:** I rank him as the greatest heavyweight champion of the 21st century. He doesn't break into my top 25 all-time heavyweights.

**SL:** How will history judge Mike Tyson?

**BS:** Ironically, much better than Lennox. Mike has almost become a pitiable character. That said, there's still resonance of deep feelings for Mike. I don't think there ever was with Lennox, going back to the Olympics when he fought for Canada. Mike Tyson had a following — and it's still there. We remember Tyson as a youth, when he beat Michael Spinks in 91 seconds — and we don't remember him being counted out on his back.

**SL:** How will history judge Oscar De La Hoya?

**BS:** Very well. Oscar is the boy-next-door type. I think he'll come out very well, particularly with the fact that he beat Trinidad, regardless of what three judges said.

**SL:** Do you think he'll fight again?

**BS:** I knew damn well that if Mosley won, De La Hoya wouldn't quit, like

he said he would. Oscar is an ATM machine, and he's not going to quit with an "L" as his last fight.